

## Photospot:

# Melanistic Striated Heron *Butorides striata* in Djibouti

Jens Hering

**Un Héron strié *Butorides striata* mélanique à Djibouti.** Un Héron strié *Butorides striata* mélanique a été photographié dans les mangroves de Godoria, Djibouti, le 5 janvier 2014. Jusqu'à présent aucun autre Héron strié mélanique n'a été observé en Afrique, mais le Natural History Museum, Tring, Royaume-Uni, possède un mâle foncé collecté au Somaliland en janvier 1897 et deux oiseaux mélaniques du Yémen et de Oman. Ces données pourraient indiquer que cette forme distincte se trouve occasionnellement dans la région. Les observateurs visitant les côtes de l'Afrique de l'Est et de l'Arabie sont encouragés à garder l'œil ouvert pour des oiseaux de couleur semblable.

**D**uring reed warbler *Acrocephalus* spp. studies at Godoria mangroves on the north-east coastal plain of Djibouti (12°09'4.15"N 43°24'37.27"E; Figs. 1–2), a melanistic Striated Heron *Butorides striata* with only one leg was observed in the

early afternoon of 5 January 2014 (Figs. 3–5). At low tide the heron was at the edge of a c.5 m-high stand of Grey Mangrove *Avicennia marina*. During the ten-minute observation the bird caught a Common Mudskipper *Periophthalmus kalolo*



**Figures 1–2.** Godoria mangroves, Obock, Djibouti, where the melanistic Striated Heron *Butorides striata* was observed on 5 January 2014 (Jens Hering)

Les mangroves de Godoria, Obock, Djibouti, où le Héron strié *Butorides striata* mélanique a été observé, 5 janvier 2014 (Jens Hering)



Figures 3–5. Melanistic Striated Heron *Butorides striata*, Godoria mangroves, Obock, Djibouti, 5 January 2014 (Jens Hering)

Héron strié *Butorides striata* mélanique, mangroves de Godoria, Obock, Djibouti, 5 janvier 2014 (Jens Hering)



**Figure 6.** Melanistic Striated Heron *Butorides striata* with Common Mudskipper *Periophthalmus kalolo* prey, Godoria mangroves, Obock, Djibouti, 5 January 2014 (Jens Hering)

Héron strié *Butorides striata* mélanique ayant capturé un périophthalme *Periophthalmus kalolo*, mangroves de Godoria, Obock, Djibouti, 5 janvier 2014 (Jens Hering)

(Fig. 6). Shortly thereafter it flew and, after a brief rest, disappeared into the mangrove thicket. A search on the following day and on 10 and 11 January, failed to relocate the bird. Daily sightings were made of several normal-coloured individuals of the subspecies *brevipes* (Fig. 7), which occurs along the Red Sea coast south to northern Somalia (Martínez-Vilalta & Motis 1992, Kushlan & Hancock 2005). A bird of the rust-coloured morph was also observed (Fig. 8).

The dark Striated Heron displayed the following characteristics. Generally uniform bluish grey; crest (in moult) and rectrices slightly darker; scapulars with marked white shafts. Primary- and secondary-coverts, uppertail-coverts, rump and belly lightly tinged wine-red, foreneck and breast with narrow, wine-red vertical stripe becoming grey lower down. Pale fringes to the coverts completely lacking. Bill and naked loreal skin dark bluish grey, tips and cutting edges of maxilla and mandible horn-coloured, legs greenish yellow blotched grey, claws grey to horn-coloured. Irides bright yellow. It is impossible to know whether

this Striated Heron was a dark morph, if there are other genetic reasons or if physical problems (missing leg) were responsible for the chromatic aberration (H. van Grouw pers. comm.).

To date no other melanistic Striated Herons have been observed in Africa (Brown *et al.* 1982, Martínez-Vilalta & Motis 1992, Kushlan & Hancock 2005). However, the Natural History Museum, Tring, UK, possesses a dark-coloured male specimen collected in Berbera, Somaliland, by E. Lort Phillips on 19 January 1897 (Fig. 9). The same collection also has two melanistic specimens from Arabia, a female collected in the vicinity of Aden, Yemen, on 4 November 1907 (Fig. 10) and the wings of a bird from Khor Dhian, Batinah coast, Oman, collected by C. J. Seton-Browne on 29 August 1968 (Fig. 11). In addition to the extremely dark colouring, it is noteworthy that the usual pale fringes to the wing-coverts are completely absent in these three individuals. The locations in Somaliland and in Yemen are c.260 km and 150 km, respectively, from that of the bird observed in Djibouti.



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**Figure 7.** Normal-coloured Striated Heron *Butorides striata brevipes*, Godoria mangroves, Obock, Djibouti, 10 January 2014 (Jens Hering)

Héron strié *Butorides striata brevipes* au plumage normal, mangroves de Godoria, Obock, Djibouti, 10 janvier 2014 (Jens Hering)



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**Figure 8.** Rust-coloured morph of Striated Heron *Butorides striata*, Godoria mangroves, Obock, Djibouti, 6 January 2014 (Jens Hering)

Héron strié *Butorides striata* de la forme roussâtre, mangroves de Godoria, Obock, Djibouti, 6 janvier 2014 (Jens Hering)

A comparable dark-coloured Striated Heron occurs on the Galápagos Islands: Lava or Galápagos Heron *B. s. sundevalli* is dimorphic, having both a dark morph, well adapted to the background of the lava coast, and a pale morph (Kushlan & Hancock 2005, Kushlan 2009). Of the closely related Green Heron *B. virescens*, which

was formerly treated as conspecific, melanistic individuals have recently been observed in Cuba (McLachlan 2011).

The observation documented here, as well as the specimens from Somaliland, Yemen and Oman, could indicate that this distinctive colour type occasionally occurs in the region. Observers



**Figure 9.** Melanistic Striated Heron *Butorides striata*, collected in Somaliland on 19 January 1897; BMNH 1898.7.27.186 (Hein van Grouw / © Natural History Museum, Tring)

Héron strié *Butorides striata* mélanique, collecté au Somaliland le 19 janvier 1897; BMNH 1898.7.27.186 (Hein van Grouw / © Natural History Museum, Tring)

**Figure 10.** Melanistic Striated Heron *Butorides striata*, collected west of Aden, Yemen, on 4 November 1907; BMNH 1934.1.1.1600 (Hein van Grouw / © Natural History Museum, Tring)

Héron strié *Butorides striata* mélanique, collecté à l'ouest d'Aden, Yemen, le 4 novembre 1907; BMNH 1934.1.1.1600 (Hein van Grouw / © Natural History Museum, Tring)

**Figure 11.** Melanistic Striated Heron *Butorides striata*, collected at Khor Dhian, Batinah coast, Oman, on 29 August 1968; BMNH 1980.4.127 (Hein van Grouw / © Natural History Museum, Tring)

Héron strié *Butorides striata* mélanique, collecté à Khor Dhian, côte de la Batinah, Oman, le 29 août 1968; BMNH 1980.4.127 (Hein van Grouw / © Natural History Museum, Tring)

visiting East African and Arabian coasts should look out for similarly coloured birds.

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